



Terminology and Contemporary Arabic Criticism

Nabil Benmelouka

University of Djelfa, (Algeria)

n.benmelouka66@gmail.com

Abstract ;

With the influx of research and critical studies coming from other cultural centers—particularly Western ones—and in light of the strong interest shown by Western scholars and critics in this field, the problem of terminological unity has come to the forefront. Although terminology is neither a recent phenomenon nor something foreign to the Arab cultural sphere—indeed, it has long been present at multiple levels across various branches of Arab knowledge—the issue of its standardization continues to trouble Arab researchers and critics. This lack of unity remains a major source of the absence of integration and cooperation, which could otherwise achieve powerful collective accomplishments, move beyond individual efforts, and elevate the level of literary and critical production.

Article info

Received

May 31.2025

Accepted

March 04.2026

Keyword:

- ✓ Terminology
- ✓ Cultural transformations
- ✓ Interpretations of Arab critics

Introduction

Since terminology, in its broad sense, has attained paramount importance and priority among researchers and scholars—having established itself as a solid pillar and foundational core that frames all research across various fields of knowledge—no scholarly activity operates outside its sphere or beyond its guiding influence in any human cultural center.

Although terminology is neither a recent development nor something imported into Arab contexts from another shore, it has in fact maintained a strong and established presence—during the flourishing days of classical Arabic scholarship—whether in grammar, rhetoric, prosody, jurisprudence, and other disciplines.

Today, however, it constitutes an obstacle for Arab researchers, particularly in the field of literary criticism, due to the absence of a comprehensive framework that would ensure its unity in their work. This has led to consequences that have unsettled the creative and critical environment and caused confusion among scholars.

If there are objective reasons for terminological variation and divergence in other contexts—especially Western ones—these can be attributed to the multiplicity of languages within those cultural centers, as each country has its own language, along with the diversity of their schools of thought and even their ideologies, despite the dominance of certain languages over others.

The situation, however, is entirely different in the Arab context, which is distinguished by several unifying elements and enriched by numerous resources and advantages that could have formed a cohesive sphere within which creative and critical engagement might achieve harmony. Foremost among these is the single language that unites the Arab countries under one tongue, in addition to other shared dimensions such as a common religion and a shared history—all factors that could foster cooperation and integration.

Yet this has not been the case. Instead, the present reality is marked by numerous differences at various levels and for diverse reasons, both objective and subjective, including:

- Individualistic work and each researcher's attachment to a different foreign language.
- The absence of specialized translation centers capable of coordinating the efforts and activities of Arab critics.
- The limited effectiveness of Arab language academies in addressing this issue, among other factors.

What is urgently required today within Arab literary circles is a purposeful and scholarly pause in which efforts are united to establish a dynamic and coordinated framework of unified action—one that organizes this field, eliminates the fragmentation of efforts, and enhances the outcomes of creative and critical activity.

The Production of Terminology in Arabic Criticism

The process of **producing terminology** is a critical and intellectual task rooted in the practical engagement with scientific matters, or more accurately, **knowledge production**. Because the Arabic language heavily utilizes critical thought, especially when interacting with modern critical theories, Arab efforts to produce specialized terminology consistent with these theories have indeed led to **"terminological multiplicity"** in the Arab world. This has created a crisis in understanding and reception for a single term. Arabic language academies and foundational institutions no longer possess their former strength or the anticipated epistemic authority. Consequently, specialized terminology in the humanities in general, and Arabic criticism in particular, suffers from this multiplicity, which can hinder comprehension and reception. Moreover, scientific research, which demands specialized language, has become an obstacle for researchers and students in their pursuit of knowledge and completion of academic requirements that employ specialized scientific language for serious and effective research, especially in critical and literary studies. Since the specialized language in Arabic focuses on defining critical scientific terms, Arabic critical terminology aims to clarify understanding and communication and refers to theoretical products built upon linguistic and systemic concepts that reflect their dimensions and regulations.

The Idea of Terminology in Arab Culture:

Although the words **"mustalah"** (term) and **"istilah"** (terminology) aren't explicitly mentioned in the Quran or prophetic Hadith, the verb **"istalaha"** (to agree upon, to coin a term) appears in ancient Arabic dictionaries like Ibn Manzur's *Lisan al-Arab* and Al-Zabidi's *Taj al-Arous*.

With the formation of sciences in Arab-Islamic civilization, new meanings for this word emerged. Al-Jahiz states: "Because the great theologians and leading thinkers surpassed the greatest orators and were more eloquent than many rhetoricians, they meticulously selected those words for those meanings. They derived those names for them from Arabic speech and agreed upon naming what had no name in the Arabic language, thus becoming successors and exemplars for all followers" (Al-Jahiz, 1998, p139).

A **term** is a linguistic entity that precisely and clearly manifests—in conjunction with the concept it denotes—as a **word, phrase, or symbol**. It serves to define precise concepts and notions related to various arts, knowledge, and sciences, agreed upon by researchers, linguists, psychologists, semanticists, sociologists, and communication specialists. Izzat Muhammad Jad defines it as: "The term is almost becoming the knight of the text that leads the flock of thought, with armies of words forming behind it, opening the fortresses of mind and emotion..." (Ruzaika, 2002, p 7)

Another definition states: "It is an objective word that conveys a specific meaning clearly and accurately, ensuring no confusion in the reader's mind. It is a

linguistic symbol specifically designated for one or many concepts, its existence linked to the pattern of concepts to which it belongs" (Belaïd, 1993, p13).

In general, **terminology gives words new, emergent connotations that differ from their fundamental or original linguistic meanings**. However, this doesn't preclude a discernible, explicit, or appropriate relationship between the conventional lexical linguistic meaning and the new scientific meaning. There must be some suitability, shared aspect, or significant or minor resemblance between its linguistic and terminological meanings (Mustafa, 1965, p 6).

If we assert that the **keys to sciences are their terms**, then there is no path for humans to grasp the logic of a science other than through its specialized terminology. It's as if these terms serve as a system of signs for each science, whose meanings are nothing but the core axes of the science itself and the content of its certainty in knowledge and accuracy in statements, as Dr. Abd al-Salam al-Messadi explains (Abd al-Salam, 1984, p 16).

The relationship between a science and its body of terms is undoubtedly strong, as the terms of sciences are their revealing images of their abstract structures, considering terms as part of specialized languages (Abd al-Salam, p. 27).

While terminology is a specialized language created to define concepts, it also relies on **morphological and syntactic dimensions**, taking into account the same considerations found in general

language used by speakers in daily communication. With continuous usage over time, the linguistic origin recedes, and the terminological meaning becomes a direct indication of the entire concept.

Terminology and the Present State of Arabic Criticism:

In the eager pursuit of keeping pace with the transformations in research circles within Western societies, a goal diligently sought by the enlightened class interested in the Arabic language, it becomes clear that the issue of **terminology has become a matter of great concern and disruption for Arab researchers**. This is due to the chaotic state they've fallen into as a result of their imprecise engagement with this issue, characterized by **disorder and a lack of coordination**, and the absence of a systematic approach based on clear vision and precise objectives. Despite the criteria established by Arab critics for this process, such as derivation, translation, and Arabization, the complete absence of coordination has led everyone to pursue different paths. In this regard, Dr. Abdul Aziz Hamouda states: "When we use terms from Western modernity with connotations linked to them within that cultural and civilizational reality, and if we seek authenticity, it would have been more appropriate for us to **coin our own terminology**, stemming from our reality with all its social, economic, and political components. This is because the gap between Western and Arab realities is vast and deep, and empty claims of building bridges over it are not enough, as that makes us forget to perceive the difference. And when we forget that feeling of difference, we fall into the forbidden,

because we overlook a set of precautions that come with this sense of difference" (Abd al-Aziz, nd, p 54). An example of this is the term **structuralisme**, which has had many translations in Arabic, appearing in a long list, including: structuralism (al-biniyawiiyyah), constructivism (al-bina'iiyyah), structural (al-haykaliyyah), and compositional (al-tarkibiyyah).

Beyond subjectivity and individual effort, another obstacle is the **tendency towards regionalism**. Tunisians favored *al-haykaliyyah*, Egyptians *al-bina'iiyyah*, Lebanese *al-bina'iiyyah*, Algerians *al-biniyawiiyyah*, and so on (Yusuf, 2008, p 130).

The lack of consistency wasn't just with others; it even appeared among critics who contradicted themselves, as seen with Dr. Abd al-Malik Murtaḍ, who shifted from *al-biniyawiiyyah* to *al-bina'iiyyah*, and Salah Fadl, who initially adopted the term *al-bina'iiyyah* and then transitioned to *al-biniyawiiyyah* and the structural method in his later books "Stylistics" and "Contemporary Criticism Methods" (Yusuf, p 131).

Another example is the term **phoneme**, which researchers and critics have circulated with various names, including:

- **Fonam**: Michel Zakaria, in his book *Al-Alsuniyah*, p. 291.
- **Fonim**: Muhammad Hilmi Khalil, in his book *Mu'jam al-Mustalahat, al-Sawtiyah*.
- **Sawt Lughawi** (Linguistic sound): Joseph Muhammad Shreim, in his book *Al-Dirasat al-Usloobiyyah*, p. 159.

- **Sawaatah**: Al-Tihami Al-Hashimi, in his book *Mu'jam al-Dalailiyah*, 2/239.
- **Suwayt**: Yusuf Hamid Jabir, Al-Bayan Kuwaiti Journal, issue 311.

As for the term "**semiology**," which arrived alongside "**semiotics**," it is very clear that Arab scholars differ significantly on its Arabic translation. Some use "**al-simiya'iyat**" (semiotics), a term prevalent among North Africans like Muhammad Miftah and Abd al-Malik Murtaḍ, among others...

Others translate the term as "**al-simiyulujia**," such as Muhammad al-Sarghini and Muhammad Nadif. Siza Qasem translates it literally as "**simiyotiqa**." Some use "**al-rumuziyyah**" (symbolism), like Antoine Ta'ma. A few others propose "**al-a'radhiyyah**" (symptomatology) as an equivalent for the foreign term (*sémiologie*), as did researchers Yusuf Ghazi and Majeed al-Nasr in their translation of de Saussure's lectures... Mundhir Ayyashi translates it as "**ilm al-isharah**" (science of signs) (Pierre, 1992), and some use "**simiya**" or "**ilm al-simiya**" (semiotics) like Mijan al-Ruwaili and Sa'd al-Bazei...

Some researchers prefer the term "**al-simiya**" given its authenticity as an Arabic term and its common use in heritage books. Dr. Adel Fakhoury states: "The science itself, i.e., semiotics, is translated as: *al-simiya*, *al-simiyyah*, *al-simiya'iyah*, *al-simiyotiqa*, *al-simiyulujia*, and *al-rumuziyyah*. The best is '**al-simiya**' because it is an old, well-known word with a specific Arabic structure for denoting science." In the same vein, Dr. Mu'jib al-Zahrani says: "As for the Arabs,

especially those in the Maghreb, they called for its translation as '**al-simiya**' in an attempt to Arabize the term, and *al-simiya* is a truly deserving word because, as an Arabic word, it is linked to a linguistic cultural semantic field that is present with it in words like: *simah* (feature), *tasma'iyyah* (naming), *wisam* (medal), *wasm* (marking), *maytham* (mark), *sima'* (countenance), *simiya'* (semiotics), and *alamah* (sign)" (Said, 1991, p 143).

Perhaps the translation of "semiology" or "semiotics" as **al-simiya'iyat** or **al-simiya** is the most accurate, due to its prevalence in ancient Arabic usage. *Al-Simiya* was associated with **divination and magic** in ancient Arabic literature (Salah, p116), and Islamic mystics called it *al-simiya* or "the science of the mysteries of letters..." (Abdullah, 2008, p48). It also appears in the Holy Quran six times meaning "sign," whether related to facial features, appearance, actions, or morals, such as His saying: "You recognize them by their marks; they do not ask the people insistently" (Surat Al-Baqarah: Ayah 273). And His saying: "Their mark is on their faces from the trace of prostration" (Surat Al-Fath: 29). And His saying: "And on the Elevations are men who recognize each by their marks" (Surat Al-A'raf: 46).

Generally, anyone observing the trajectory of Arabic critical terminology can describe its state as one of **cultural alienation and linguistic disorder**. While the ideas of people and culturally diverse societies often intersect and share many issues, there are distinguishing civilizational connotations that only the mother tongue can convey. The term

"semiology," for example, even if only the suffix "-logy" separates it from Arabic, has rendered it extremely foreign, detaching it from its specific connotations in the Arabic language, not to mention the unpleasant musical impact it has on the Arab ear.

Abd al-Aziz Hamouda states: "The terminology crisis is not a translation crisis—that is, not a crisis of transferring a word or term from one linguistic context to another, namely Arabic. This is, of course, an easy solution or way out that modernists often resort to, which also implies blaming the Arabic language and its inability to deal with new or complex concepts... However, the evidence confirms that the terminology crisis has always been a result, not a cause... And while the chaos of modernist critical terminology in Arabic is sufficient to justify dealing with extreme caution and prudence when borrowing from Western modernity and postmodernism, dwelling on the chaos of 'borrowed' or transferred terminology sets the stage for the core of the current study: that reading and connecting with Western critical heritage—instead of severing ties—would have saved the Arab intellectual many of the pitfalls of terminological chaos. Here, too, we briefly point out that we cannot separate the deliberate ambiguity and intentional evasion that characterize modernist Arabic writings from the terminology crisis" (Abd al-Aziz ,n.d)..

And since this situation is ongoing and has permeated all aspects of this vital and complex field, which has become a heavy burden straining the efforts of recipients, especially students and the general public,

its causes appear numerous and varied. The main focus is the critic and the series of pitfalls and obstacles they have encountered, including:

1. **Individualistic Tendency:** Relying on personal effort, which has led to chaos and a wide multiplicity in the terminological stock.
2. **Competence of the Translator:** Terminology is not merely about finding an equivalent for a Western term; it's essential to consider the cultural, linguistic, and semantic charges of the source term. This can only be achieved by someone deeply insightful into the secrets and depths of the target language.
3. **Consideration for Arabic Language Nuances:** Paying attention to the intricacies and secrets of the Arabic language to ensure that the chosen terms are not inert bodies that fail to convey semantic dimensions and cultural connotations.
4. **Absence of Unified and Coordinated Collective Work:** This is evident in the lack of a strong role for Arabic language academies. Even when they exist, there is no full commitment to the projects, regulations, and recommendations that emanate from them. For instance, the symposium on unifying methodologies for coining Arabic scientific terms, organized by the Arabization Coordination Bureau of the Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organization in 1981—attended by language academies, some ministries of education, and some scientific institutes and cultural centers—laid down 18 principles for unifying Arabic terminology methodologies. However, another

symposium held in 1991 by the Faculty of Arts and Human Sciences in Rabat made the first symposium subject to scientific questioning after researchers warned against the danger of slipping into heritage and relying solely on it (Yusuf, p75, 85).

5. **Cultural Excess and Obsession:** Some modernist researchers from our nation exhibit an obsession with Western culture and a strong desire to champion it.

In any case, whatever the reasons or causes behind the absence of coordination and unified action—or those related to the personal considerations of researchers and scholars that have nothing to do with objectivity—or those affecting certain lamenting souls who weep over the glories of their past and see themselves only within the mantle of their forefathers, or others infatuated with the breezes and shades of another culture and perpetually groaning under a sense of deficiency and inferiority—between all of this arise consequences that run counter to what is hoped for regarding the idea of unified Arab research cooperation. Among these consequences are:

- Disrupting the course of Arab research
- Confusing the Arab recipient
- Undermining the idea of integration
- Enriching the terminological field with unnecessary additions
- Creating a rift within the single unified language, which ought to be unifying through its mechanisms before its opinions and theses

To overcome such a situation, it is necessary to establish a set of academic measures according to the following perspective:

The matter should be centrally entrusted to the language academies, after establishing a working and coordination framework to define the forms of cooperation among them. Oversight should naturally be assigned to specialists in translation, Arabization, and the formulation of terminological structures within these academies.

The establishment of national or local branches entrusted with linking and facilitating communication between the academies and research bases at the level of university research laboratories and knowledge-production units in each country. These branches would transmit the academies' outputs to national research bodies on the one hand, while also conveying researchers' concerns—through a reciprocal process—back to the academies on the other.

Ensuring the adoption of a binding framework accompanying the outputs issued by the academies, so that they may be effective and impactful, and so as to prevent those who seek to act in isolation. Through such measures, we may avoid the repercussions of individual efforts carried out without coordination—efforts that serve neither research nor researchers, and that inflict intellectual and cultural harm upon a single shared language due to the disturbances and tensions that result from them.

Peace be upon the Messengers, and praise be to God, Lord of the Worlds.

References:

- [1] Khidr bin Ghalian Al-Qurashi, Arabization of Sciences and Terminology within the Arabic Language Academy, Arabization Coordination Bureau, Rabat, No. 19, p. 142.
- [2] Al-Jahiz Amr bin Bahr, *Al-Hayawan*, edited and explained by: Abd al-Salam Muhammad Haroun, Dar Al-Jeel, Beirut, n.d., Vol. 1, p. 75.
- [3] Sunan al-Tirmidhi, Knowledge (2687), Sunan Ibn Majah, Asceticism (4169).
- [4] Al-Jahiz, *Al-Bayan wa al-Tabyin*, edited by: Muhammad Abd al-Salam Haroun, Al-Khanji Library, 7th ed., Cairo, 1998, Vol. 1, p. 139.
- [5] Ruzaika Tawta, *Al-Mustalah al-Naqdi wa al-Lisani al-Naqdi*, The Egyptian Book Authority, Cairo, 2002, p. 7.
- [6] Belaid Saleh, *The Role of Western Cultural Institutions in the Development of the Arabic Language*, PhD thesis, supervised by Abd al-Rahman al-Haj Saleh, 1992, 1993, p. 13.
- [7] Mustafa al-Shihabi, *Al-Mustalahat al-Ilmiyah fi al-Lugha al-Arabiyah fi al-Qadeem wa al-Hadith*, The Arab Scientific Academy, Damascus, 2nd ed., 1965, p. 6.
- [8] Abd al-Salam al-Messadi, *Qamus al-Lisaniyat ma' Muqaddimah fi Ilm al-*

Mustalah, The Arab Book House, Tunis, Libya, 1984, p. 16.

[18] Yusuf Waghli, *Previous reference*, pp. 75 and 85.

[9] Abd al-Salam al-Messadi, *Siyaghat al-Mustalah wa Ususuha al-Nazariyah*, p. 27.

[10] Abd al-Aziz Hamouda, *Al-Maraya al-Muqa'arah, Nahw al-Nazariyah al-Naqdiyyah*, The National Council for Culture, Arts and Literature, Kuwait, 1st ed., n.d., p. 54.

[11] Yusuf Waghli, *Ishkaliyat al-Mustalah fi al-Khitab al-Naqdi al-Arabi al-Jadid*, Al-Ikhtilaf Publications, Algeria, and The Arab Scientific House Publishers, Beirut, 1st ed., 2008, p. 130.

[12] Ibid., p. 131.

[13] Pierre Guiraud, *Ilm al-Isharah: al-Simiyyulujia*, translated by: Mundhir Ayyashi, Talas for Studies, Translation and Publishing, Syria, 1992.

[14] Said al-Zahrani, *Fi al-Muqaraba al-Simiya'iyah, Alamat fi al-Naqd al-Adabi*, 1991, Vol. 1, No. 2, p. 143. ([15]) Salah Fadl, *Manahij al-Naqd al-Mu'asir*, Dar Al-Afaq Al-Arabia, Egypt, p. 116.

[16] Abdullah Thani, *Simiya'iyat al-Surah: Mughamara Simiya'iyah fi Ashhar al-Irsaliyat al-Basariyah fi al-Alam*, Al-Buraq, Amman, 1st ed., 2008, p. 48.

[17] Abd al-Aziz Hamouda, *Al-Maraya al-Muqa'arah, Nahw Nazariyah Naqdiyyah*, The National Council for Culture, Arts and Literature, Kuwait, 1st ed., n.d.